

METHOD FOR THE REMOVAL AND RECOVERY OF THE OILY COMPONENT
FROM DRILL CUTTINGS WITH LIQUID CO₂

The present invention relates to a method for the
10 treatment of oily drill cuttings from oil wells.

More specifically, the present invention relates to a
method for the removal and recovery of the oily component
from drill cuttings which allows the contemporaneous de-
classification of the cutting from dangerous waste-
15 products.

The term "drill cuttings", as used in the present de-
scription and claims indicates the crushed material pro-
duced during the drilling mixed with drilling sludge. This
is therefore a fluid with a rheology typical of aqueous
20 suspensions with a high solid content such as sludge or
slurry.

It is known that the function of drilling sludge is to
consolidate the walls of the hole of an oil well, protect
the metallic parts from corrosion, cool and lubricate the
25 bit during drilling. Sludge, which can be water-based or

oil-based, also supplies the pressure for keeping the geological formation integral and has the function of carrying the cuttings produced in the excavation by the action of the bit, to the surface. Oil sludge consists, for example, 5 of mineral oil, barite, bentonite and other additives such as emulsifying agents and polymers.

In the past drill cuttings, mostly coming from off-shore platforms, were discharged into the sea creating an unacceptable environmental impact level. There are also 10 considerable problems with respect to dispersion on the ground.

Various methods are used for removing oil sludge from cuttings: among these, washing systems with detergents, thermal and distillation systems. The main disadvantages of 15 these methods are respectively linked to low efficiency, limited safety, especially when operating off-shore, high costs and plant construction complexity.

The use of a compressible solvent for the recovery of oil from drill cuttings, with acceptable residual concentration levels in the solid, was proposed with reference to 20 "supercritical processes" i.e. bringing the fluid above its critical conditions during the treatment of the cutting. The application, described in S. Saintpère et al. (2000), "Supercritical CO₂ extraction applied to oily drilling cut- 25 tings", SPE 63126, SPE International, using carbon dioxide

(CO₂), is not competitive from an economical point of view.

It was also verified that the treatment process effected with CO₂ under supercritical conditions is strongly conditioned by the physico-chemical characteristics of the
5 cutting which jeopardizes the removal efficacy, in terms of oil recovery and residual concentration in the solid.

The Applicant has now found that the oily part of cuttings coming from the drilling of oil wells can be removed with an extraction method which uses, as solvent, CO₂ in
10 the liquid state, obtaining an oil with the same characteristics as the mud formulation product and which, when suitable additives are added, can be re-used in other drillings whereas the solid part (cuttings) can be re-admitted into the environment or sent for conventional disposal.

15 With respect to CO₂ brought to so-called "supercritical" conditions, or beyond the critical point, the use of CO₂ in liquid phase has the following advantages:

- lower dehydration of the solid phase and consequently lower water production to be sent to the treatment;
- 20 - decrease in the plant costs, to be attributed to the limited operating pressures, in terms of equipment and piping.

In addition, the oily fraction removed with the use of the compressible fluid is completely recovered at the end
25 of the process, without being contaminated by processing

solvents and can be used again for subsequent processings, following refining processes and/or the addition of suitable additives.

The use as solvent of a fluid compatible with problems
5 associated with pollution, such as CO₂, is in line with the growing demand for environmental protection, as a result of the non-dangerous nature of the fluid and also because of the absolute lack of contaminating waste-products deriving from the process.

10 In accordance with this, the object of the present invention relates to a method for the decontamination of oily cuttings, coming from the drilling of oil wells, and the contemporaneous recovery of the oily component, comprising the following steps:

15 a) treatment of said cuttings with CO₂ in the liquid state at a pressure value ranging from 45 to 80 bar and a temperature corresponding to the saturation value; the operation takes place by continuously feeding the solvent, in liquid phase, to the vessel containing the cuttings, in a ratio from 2 to 20 times by weight with respect to the cuttings;

20 b) separation of the liquid phase (solution) from the solid phase; the solid phase remains confined inside the treatment vessel;

25 c) expansion of the solution leaving step (b), separation

of the oily phase and recycling of the CO₂ in vapour phase; the oily phase is discharged and recovered from the expansion vessel;

5 d) compression and cooling of the CO₂ vapour and its recycling to step (a), after optional under-cooling.

More specifically, the present invention is illustrated in the enclosed claims.

The method according to the present invention has considerable advantages both from an economical and environmental point of view. The drill cuttings defined by the current regulations as being harmful waste-products have such characteristics as to make them, after treatment, compatible with the environment, whereas the oily part removed can be re-used as drilling sludge, with the addition of possible additives.

The solvent used is inert under the process and environmental conditions. The process operates with a closed cycle, with complete recycling of the CO₂.

The method, object of the present invention, involves the use of small dimensional machines and consequently with the possibility of use also for off-shore applications. From an economical point of view, moreover, the present method seems to be of great interest with respect to alternative on-shore processes.

25 An applicative example referring to the removal of the

oily fraction from a conventional cutting, is provided hereunder for purely illustrative purposes.

EXAMPLE

A typical embodiment of the method, object of the present invention, is schematized in the block scheme illustrated in the enclosed figure.

The cutting to be treated is charged into the extractor (3), according to the known art.

The extractor is equipped with filtrating septa upstream and down-stream, generally made of porous steel, for limiting the cutting.

After closing, the extractor is pressurized with the CO₂ in vapour phase, taken from the accumulation tank (1). The pressurization can be effected from the inlet situated at the bottom of the vessel or from the inlet situated at the head, generally from the bottom.

When a pressure value is reached, which is close to that of the accumulation tank, the vapour feeding is interrupted and the extractor is fed with the CO₂ in liquid phase, still from the accumulation tank.

The complete filling of the reactor is obtained by acting on the volumetric pump situated upstream of the extractor, by sucking the liquid CO₂ from the accumulation tank.

The liquid CO₂ is closely distributed in the cutting,

dissolving the oily fraction.

The whole plant is pressurized following an analogous procedure, in all parts. The removal phase begins by continuously feeding the liquid CO₂ to the extractor using the 5 pumping system, with the extractor situated in line with respect to the solvent flow.

The liquid solution leaving the extractor, consisting of the CO₂ solvent and the dissolved oily fraction, flows through the lamination valve (4) undergoing decompression 10 at a lower pressure value. The oily fraction is thus continuously removed from the cutting.

The liquid-vapour mixture which is formed following lamination, is sent to a heat exchanger (5) which has the function of bringing the CO₂ solvent forming the mixture to 15 vapour phase, whereas the oily fraction is separated from the stream as liquid phase.

The mixture of CO₂ vapour - liquid oily phase is passed through a separator with a cyclone effect (6), or a series of several separators with a gravimetric and cyclone 20 effect, to obtain the complete separation of the liquid oily fraction from the CO₂ vapour stream.

An additional separation filter can complete the configuration of the separation section.

The liquid oily fraction is collected at the bottom of 25 the separator or separators, from which it is removed by an

intermittent vent through the valve situated at the bottom of each separator.

The CO₂ in aeriform vapour-gas phase leaving the separation section is cooled and condensed (8), and recovered 5 in the accumulation tank (1), from where, after undercooling (2), it is used for re-starting the extraction cycle.

With reference to the removal cycle, the moving of the solvent takes place by means of a volumetric pump (7) which 10 sucks the liquid leaving the accumulation tank (1) and compresses it at the pressure value of the accumulation tank.

The removal phase is prolonged until the required recovery parameter is reached, referring to the percentage of oily fraction removed with respect to its initial content 15 in the cutting (removal percentage), or the percentage of oily fraction removed referring to the quantity of raw cutting treated (yield percentage).

The time parameter of the removal process is provided by the ratio between the quantity of CO₂ used with respect 20 to the weight unit of cutting treated. This weight ratio depends on the process parameters, the type of solvent used, and the type of cutting treated, and ranges from 4 to 30, generally 10.

When the removal phase has been interrupted by the 25 stopping of the continuous flow of CO₂, the extractor is

isolated and the solvent contained therein is recovered using an auxiliary compressor, necessary in this phase for compressing the vapour at the pressure of the accumulation tank.

5 The recovery phase of the CO₂ is followed by the final depressurization phase to the atmospheric value and subsequently the recovery of the cutting treated, following the known procedures.

10 The data referring to a test carried out according to the procedure described above are as follows:

Solvent fluid	carbon dioxide (CO ₂)
Type of cutting	conventional
Initial oil content	9.5%
Extraction pressure	68 bar
15 Extraction temperature	20°C
Ratio between CO ₂ referring to the cutting	9 kg/kg
Final oil content	1.0%
Oil removal degree	>90%